

I KNOW TREES

This tree bears fruit worth the wait

When I was about 6 years old, my best friend handed me what looked like a juicy little plum and said I should take a bite. I fell for one of the oldest tricks in the world. That was my introduction to

diospyros virginiana, the common persimmon. True, persimmons are nutritious and can be quite tasty. When ripe. I learned this later. But still, it would be quite a few years before I could bring myself to try another one.



Kerry Kellam

The early European settlers were also put off by the taste of this little fruit that is so common in the woods of eastern North America. Capt. John Smith wrote, "If it be not ripe it will draw a man's mouth awire with much torment; but when ripe, it is as delicious as an apricot."

It was a local tribe of American Indians, the Algonquins, who explained to the hungry settlers that the bitter taste of "pessamin" (their word for it, and thus ours) went away as cold weather approached. And none too soon for the settlers, as food of any kind was hard to come by those first few winters. Of course, the industrious pioneers wasted no time in using the persimmon to help pass the long winter nights, noting that it "yields on distillation, after fermentation, a quality of spirits."

Persimmon is a member of the ebony family of trees, which are mostly found

KELLAM Persimmons deserve a place in the landscape – just wait till the fruit is ripe before biting in.

in the tropics. Two species are native to North America. Although the tropical ebonies are famous for their lumber, the North American trees don't attain a size that compares to these, though they do produce a small quantity of usable wood.

The Texas persimmon, or "chapote" as it's known along the border, bears a small fruit that turns black when ripe and is used to make a black dye. It's edible but is more seed than fruit. This tree is underutilized in the landscape. It has an interesting bark that curls and appears to peel off as the tree matures. The smooth inner bark varies in color from gray to white with splashes of pink. Because of its compact size, it works well in small spaces and is tolerant of high temperatures. Its deep root system makes it a good candidate for low-water-usage landscaping.

Another persimmon also seen occasionally in the landscape, *diospyros kaki*, is from China. This one lives up to the botanical name *diospyros*, which is Greek for "food of the gods." Introduced to the United States in 1855 by Commodore Perry, who brought some back from Japan, the kaki not only makes an attractive tree but also is capable of producing a prodigious amount of fruit. High in vitamin C and beta carotene, and loaded with potassium, the fruit deserves a more prominent place on the

American dinner table. The tree looks like something out of a fairy tale, with large dark green tropical leaves and dark, nearly black bark contrasting with brightly colored fruit.

Kenneth, a reader in North Texas who recently e-mailed me, described one in his garden quite elegantly, saying, "the fruit is delicious and the tree's appearance with the brilliant fruit glowing in the late autumn after all the leaves have fallen is quite spectacular." But still, take my word for it: Don't eat a persimmon until it's ripe.

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A persimmon tastes best when it looks wrinkled to the point of being almost spoiled.